

To Honor the Net in Invitational Counseling

William B. Stafford
Lehigh University

Honoring the net is a concept presented by Purkey in his discussion of the four-corner press. In a counseling setting this concept relates to the perceptions of the counselor and the client as they encounter one another in the counseling relationship, as well as the relationship itself. This manuscript attempts to examine the dynamic of the net and the process of honoring the net in these interactions.

Dante, in his *Inferno*, related how the Pilgrim was about to descend into Hell in order to rise through Purgatory from where he could reach the pinnacle of the Mount of Joy and ultimately the Light of God. The Pilgrim had some idea of what he might expect to encounter on his journey and he dreaded it, so he chose a fellow traveler to help him better understand what he would experience. His choice was interesting. He did not choose a person of science, for the answers he sought were not rational-logical understandings. He did not choose a philosopher, as he reasoned the philosopher only speculates about life. The companion the Pilgrim did choose was Virgil, the poet, for Dante knew the poet had encountered life and had an understanding of life, which Dante also sought.

One of the more pivotal notions in the discussion of invitational theory has been that of honoring the net. The net is a metaphoric representation of the boundaries that separate the inviter and the person being invited. As in any interaction where a net is employed, the net may *not* be violated as a boundary between the individuals involved in the interaction. In an invitational sense, the counselor may send messages, both verbal and nonverbal, of his or her intent to help to the client. However,

the counselor may not violate the net by imposing or coercing his or her values and judgments on the client without violating the integrity of the client as well as the *process* of counseling itself. The counselor must, of necessity, view the client as being genuinely valued, able and responsible for his or her own decisions and actions without direct intervention from the counselor, i.e., violating the net.

This concept seems to embody so many of the basic principles, understandings and beliefs of effective human interactions, and especially invitational theory, that it stands out in a singular and summary manner. Rogers recognized the importance of this back in the '40s when he spoke of unconditional positive regard for the other. This notion also has a more universal implication, as Emerson (1929) stated this issue in his "Essay on Self-Reliance":

Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind . . . There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better or for worse as his portion. The power, which resides in him, is new in nature, and no one but he knows what he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. p. 138

Purkey presented the notion of honoring the net when he presented what he labeled "An Anatomy of An Invitation". This is a perceptual construct of the inviting process from the perspective of both the person doing the inviting, and the person being invited. Stafford (1992) examined this concept in counseling because of his belief in the intensely personal and dynamic interaction between counselor and client that *must* occur in any meaningful counseling relationship.

Many facets are involved in the process of honoring the net, which draw their roots from perceptual psychology. While we may be able to examine directly and quantify some of the more overt aspects of honoring the net, we must ultimately conclude, I believe, that the quality of the interaction, is probably un-definable to some extent. These processes, however, are critical and essential components of the counselor's stance. This stance, in turn, directly affects the perception of the client, which may either allow for or deny the opportunity for this interaction even to occur. Jung stated this so succinctly: "Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of living soul." (quoted in Belkin, 1988, p.42).

Respect

Central to the whole notion of honoring the net is the very basic assumption of respect for the client. As noted before, respect for the person is very closely akin to Rogers' position for positive regard. We, as counselors, must come to the client with no preconceived agenda of what the client is to do or to become. That is not only the *client's prerogative*: it is also the *client's task*. The counselor, in essence, is saying to the client: "I respect your right to be you, and I have no desire, no hidden agenda, nor any motive, to re-create you in any particular image. I am I, and you are you (in a very clear sense of Fritz Perls, 1974), and I will not violate who you are because I honor who you are." This is so crucial for the counselor to express, and for the client to perceive, if any interaction of significance between the two is to occur.

It is also important to acknowledge that this type of acceptance and respect are difficult to achieve and maintain. We, as outsiders of the other's private perceptual world, may often see serious consequences of particular choices the client may be considering. It may be so tempting to intervene directly. This disregards the

client's perception of reality and bypasses the opportunity to help the client discover from his or her perspective what more effective alternative might be explored. Each client presents a new perspective that assumes the counselor must constantly be sensitive to his or her level of client respect and acceptance.

Accepting the counselor's invitation is an acknowledgment that, temporarily at least, the client has allowed the counselor to come into contact with some aspects of the client's life with which the client feels comfortable and safe enough to share with the counselor at that moment in time. It may be very fragile; it may be very transient; and it may not be highly significant in terms of content, but the power of the process of this interaction may often defy quantification and definition, while at the same time its personal significance seems undeniable.

Listening

Stephen King (1982) in the prologue to his story, "The Body" from his book, *Stand By Me*, expresses the importance of being heard, understood, and accepted. The most important things are the hardest things to say:

They are the things you get ashamed of, because words diminish the...words shrink things that seemed limitless when they were in your head to no more than living size when they're brought out. But it's more than that, isn't it? The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried, like landmarks to a treasure your enemies would love to steal away. *And you make revelations that cost you dearly only to have people look at you in a funny way, not understanding what you've said at all, or why you thought it was so important you*

almost cried while you were saying it. That's the worst, I think. When the secret stays locked within not for want of a teller, but for want of an understanding ear. (p.45) [italics added by author]

Kopp (1987) spoke to this issue as well in his book, *Who Am I...Really?* Kopp's thesis was that each person has a personal life story to tell. The importance of telling the story is to share it so that it can be better understood by the teller as he or she attempts to relate it to others. The person searches for someone who is able to hear and understand the significance of his or her story. Our culture, and many times the helping professionals within the culture, often mistake this process as the individual seeking someone to hear their story so the listener will tell them what they should do. Kopp, however, maintains the individual is capable of setting one's own course. In order to do this, however, the individual needs the affirmation that his or her own life story has been heard and understood in terms of the story's significance by another. Kopp would agree with King that the problem is *not* the want of a teller, but the want of an understanding and caring listener.

One assumption regarding this dilemma seems to lie with the degree to which the counselor has a reasonable degree of self-understanding of his or her own life story. This is not to suggest the counselor is to be a perfectly adjusted individual. On the contrary, Rollo May (1984), in his consideration of "The Wounded Healer", stated the therapist who presents himself/herself as being the model of personal adjustment, should probably be avoided because that person probably is *not* in touch with his or her own personal existence. Therapeutically, such a counselor could likely be a hindrance to the client's growth because of this lack of self-understanding regarding one's own existence.

This does not mean that an effective listener must, therefore, be maladjusted. Peck (1978) maintains that all of us are “wounded” (a la May) to some extent; but that these wounds are the price one pays for engaging and interacting with life. Therefore, that person has some sense of what life is about and how one grows through life experiences. The person, who ignores the vicissitudes of engaging life, has a limited experience base to bring to the counseling relationship.

Clark Moustakas (1972), in his book, *Loneliness and Love*, states this notion forcibly:

When I am in touch with myself, whatever there is, is all there—the bright, radiating lights and the dark, disturbing shadows . . . This faith in myself, to be who I am extends beyond me; it does not consider the other as separate but lets life flow in its own spiraling way. I think this is the only way to authentic communication. (p 3)

The Counselor as a Fellow Traveler

Dante's *Inferno* also expresses another very important concept related to honoring the net. Much of contemporary research literature in human behavior is typically postulated in terms of process vs. outcome. Sadly, this is often presented as being dichotomous. That is, the focus of the counseling relationship must be either process (what we are doing) or outcome (what happens as a result of the interaction). This suggests that one has little to do with the other. The end result is that in most human interactions we tend to opt for measuring outcomes primarily because they are more easily established, more easily observed and quantified. From an invitational point of view, however, the outcomes (goals) are typically established *external* to the client who, is presumably be-ing helped, and those goals may or may not be part of the

client's milieu. Additionally, in these conditions the process involved is often viewed as a "technique" or "formula" to be tried to achieve the established goals. The process is seldom examined in light of the qualitative interactions between counselor and client and how they were determined as mutually defined goals. Perhaps this is due in part to our obsession for outcomes. Perhaps it is also due to the difficulty in understanding and evaluating process variables even though a wealth of research supports this area. Dante was more concerned with the process of experiencing life rather than putting all the emphasis on the outcome of life. In essence, perhaps Dante was saying—if you experience life, your direction and outcome will become clearer. Camus (1987) stated this sometime later when he proclaimed, "existence precedes essence." That is, you must *live* life in order to *experience* life. A number of years ago a former student shared what I consider to be a brilliant insight to me. It was not her creation, but it was a seed another had planted some years back, and which had been significant to her. The insight was a simple declarative statement: "May your destination be as rewarding and fulfilling as your journey to that destination" (anonymous).

The Client and Counselor's Journey

It has been suggested that the therapeutic journey is a joint venture for both the counselor and the client. While the counselor may have traveled similar roads in the past with former clients, there must always be the recognition that *this* client is new and unique.

This can become a critical incident when one looks at the dyad of the counselor interacting with the client. The counselor may look at the client's dilemma and see a logical and desirable goal, perhaps concluding what the client ought to do. As the client needs to incorporate his or her life experiences into a personal gestalt, so

must the counselor *allow* for this process to happen if it naturally unfolds this way. The counselor, however, should not *make* it happen because the counselor determines that it should be the goal.

In the counselor's best judgment, he or she may see an ideal goal; the most desirable outcome and the most professional thing to do. However, the counselor, too, must remember that counseling is the *client's* journey; the counseling outcomes are the *client's* outcomes and the personal existence is the *client's* existence. This may well be the *essence* of honoring the net.

Thich Nhat Hanh's book, *Zen Keys* (1974), relates the statement of Lin Chi, the Zen master: "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha. If you meet the Patriarch, kill the Patriarch" (p. 50). Thich Nhat Hanh continues,

For the one who only has devotion (to the Buddha), this declaration is terrible; it confuses him completely. But its effect depends on the mentality and capacity of the one who hears. If the man is strong, he truly will have the capacity to liberate himself from all authority, whatever it might be, and to accomplish in himself ultimate truth. Truth is reality itself and not concepts. If we cling to a certain number of concepts and consider them as being reality, we lose reality. This is why it is necessary to "kill" the concepts of reality in order that reality itself can be realized and reveal itself. To kill the Buddha is without doubt the only way to see the Buddha. The concept one has formed of the Buddha impedes one from seeing the Buddha himself. (p. 50)

How Far Should We Honor the Net?

A logical question, which might arise at this point, is to what extent is it practical to honor the net when interacting with another. Are there no limits, and how do we justify either the imposition of limits or maintain the net is inviolable? Even as the notion that honoring the net is basic to effective human interaction, this must also be a question for the reader. You, as the reader, may be saying to yourself, "Yes, in theory this may be true, but are there limits to which you can apply this or any principle?" This is an issue for each of us individually, and this is an issue which each of us must address in our own way.

Personally, this whole notion evolved from a conundrum I faced a number of years ago. That dilemma centered on the issue of how intelligent, capable and mostly stable adolescents with whom I was working could periodically engage in such paradoxical behavior making apparently random, senseless, irrational, and often destructive decisions and engage in corresponding behaviors. During that time, I happened upon a book authored by Donald Snygg and Arthur Combs. I regret that I have lost the citation, but a statement by Combs provided me an entirely fresh perspective, which responded to my puzzle. The words stand out clearly in my mind, although I am sure they are *not* a direct quote, but the intent of the paraphrase was: *Whatever the individual does is purposeful, relevant and pertinent to the individual as he or she perceives the situation at the moment of action.* What a basic and yet powerful observation, and what a unique way of looking at individual behavior. Very succinctly, Combs was summarizing the very basic tenets of perceptual psychology.

While Combs did not draw directly from Alfred Adler (1956), Adler's point that all behavior is caused, and likewise, all misbehavior is caused, became a part of my awareness at that time. Combs, however, provided a sharper focus to the issue. In a perceptual sense, we see, perceive, understand and respond

depending upon how we are able view a given situation in our private world at a point in time. This perception can indeed be quite temporal in nature. All of us have experienced those situations in which we have said or done something, which seconds later, we have regretted and would immediately undo if we could possibly have the opportunity to do so. Rationally and logically the approach typically taken by an outside observer would be to question the offender, “Why did you do that?” Such a question would do little beyond producing a series of rationalizations for the inappropriate behavior. It would do little in understanding what had transpired.

Combs was suggesting that each interaction is unique to the individual and perceptions of what is transpiring at a given time will be determined not only by the obvious circumstances of the situation, but also by other and more subtle factors at play in that situation of which neither participant may be fully aware. Each of us brings more to a given interaction more than may be apparent as the situation unfolds. These other factors can and do play a significant part in how we perceive the situation. They affect how we will respond.

Current research adds to the richness of understanding of situations related to this phenomenon. The National Institute of Mental Health (2001) has reported research related to patterns of adolescent brain development and its attendant effects on adolescent behavior. Through the use of more sophisticated brain imaging (e.g., MRI), neurologists have reported some dramatic changes which occur during adolescence. While the cause is not completely understood, it is believed to be a part of neurological process of “pruning” of gray matter which is produced in excess at various times of development. It has long been recognized that the human organism is “overbuilt,” so to speak, and as a result, a pruning process takes place based largely on the principle of “use

it or lose it.” Thus, it is with the gray matter during adolescence, where the gray matter predominates largely to the frontal lobe, which is often referred to as the seat of executive functions. That is, the areas of planning, impulse control and reasoning. The current research is aided by the use of 145 longitudinal subjects. Thus with this pruning process in early-to-late adolescence, there is a decrease in impulsive behaviors and a greater awareness of the importance of planning and reasoning. All of these factors may be related to the more irrational behaviors and reckless actions referred to earlier in relation to Combs’ observations. It is one of the factors influencing the characters on stage who are interacting with life situations.

In the case of the adolescents mentioned earlier in this discussion, too often the readily available excuses of “Boys will be boys,” “It’s just that adolescence thing,” or “His hormones are really cooking today” may provide an amusing but not very helpful response. Ignoring the situation is not only useless; it may be harmful, as it tends to perpetuate unexamined behavior. What Combs was suggesting was that the interaction between the counselor and the client be processed for the dynamics involved.

Individual perception is influenced, in part, by how the person also perceives external assessments or statements regarding one’s behavior or being. A case in point, I was recently invited to attend a 40th class reunion of a school where I had worked in the past. Each of the former students did brief biographies since they had graduated. One such entry stood out in very stark relief from the others: “As expected, I never amounted to anything.” In contrast, most who knew that former student regarded him in just the opposite of his perception.

Purkey and Stanley (1990) have clearly demonstrated this in their Blue Card- Orange Card metaphor. We are indeed influenced by the perceptions, both overtly and covertly expressed, by other

individuals. Combs reminded us that we behave according to the way we perceive. In a counseling or therapeutic sense that means that if I, as a counselor, ignore, reject, disagree, argue or rebut your stated perceptions of yourself, I may be showing you very clearly that I *do not* understand what it is like in your perceptual world. There are many things that can happen at this point. Perhaps the most devastating is that the person trying to get you to understand his/her perceptual world may conclude: “What's the use? You cannot understand where I am, and perhaps nobody can. As a result, I am even more isolated than ever!” What a feeling of despair must come over a person at such a time.

Conclusion

Combs (1967) also noted that people do not consistently act on ideas; they do tend, however, to act upon beliefs. The “idea” of people regarding others as being valued, capable and responsible are just ideas, and they probably have limited impact upon our behaviors as long as they remain at the idea stage. However, the ideas become incorporated into one's belief system, however, these beliefs become quite different in terms of how that person attempts to behave in relation to beliefs. This is also true about honoring the net of interactions with others. If this notion of honoring the net is incorporated into our belief system, then that belief, and the way we behave in our interactions, is unconditional to the extent we are able to practice it, and our behaviors will be quite different from those at the idea stage.

Burlew (1995) addressed this issue of our theoretical and philosophical roots when he stated, “(for counselors) once graduated . . . it is easy to forget our ‘roots’. On the other hand, maybe we are not forgetting our roots but are forgetting that theory is nothing until the practitioner gives it life and meaning” (p. 4).

References

- Belkin, G. S. (1988). *Introduction to counseling* (third edition). Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown.
- Burlew, L. D. (1995, Fall). Human development: The lost art of theory. *Chi Sigma Iota Newsletter*, 10 (2), 4-5.
- Camus, A. (1987). American journals/Albert Camus. (H. Levic, Trans.) *Journaux de Voyage. English*. New York: Paragon House.
- Combs, A. W. (Speaker). (1967). *What can man become?* (Cassette Recording), Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Department of Education.
- Emerson, R. W. (1929). Essay on self-reliance. In The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. New York: W. H. Wise.
- King, S. (1982). *Stand by me*. New York: Signet Books

- Kopp, S. B. (1987). *Who am I...Really?* Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tharcher, Inc.
- Kopp, S. B. (1972). *If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!* New York: Bantam Books.
- May, R. (Speaker). (1984). *The wounded healer* (Cassette Recording), Houston, TX: American Counseling Association.
- Moustakas, C. E. (1972). *Loneliness and love*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- National Institute for Mental Health. (2001). *Teenage brain: A work in progress*. (NIH Public Information No. 01-4929). Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- Peck, M. S. (1978). *The road less traveled*. New York, Simon & Schuster.
- Perls, F. S. (1974). *Gestalt therapy verbatim*. (J. O. Stevens, Ed. And Comp.) New York: Bantam Books.
- Purkey, W. W. & Stanley, P. H. (1990). A blue and orange metaphor for counselors. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 68, 587.
- Stafford, W. B. (1992). Invitational theory and counseling. In J. M. Novak (Ed.), *Advancing invitational thinking* (pp. 195-220). San Francisco: Caddo Gap Press.
- Thich Nhat Hanh, (1974). *Zen Keys*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

William B. Stafford is Associate Professor Emeritus at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, PA. A charter member of the International Alliance of Invitational Education, Bill is a past editor of the *Journal of Invitational theory and Practice*. wbs0@lehigh.edu